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SUBJECT: BOUTERSE MURDER TRIAL PROGRESS PROCEEDS IN TINY INCREMENTS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. One week after final pre-trial motions were cleared on June 11 in the murder trial of former military strongman Desi Bouterse, the Organization of American States (OAS) promised to send observers in response to a request from the Government of Suriname (GOS). While he has reacted to past trial progress with threats, Bouterse's latest reaction was to feign nonchalance. Meanwhile, the GOS proceeded with detailed arrangements for the trial venue. If history is any teacher, further delays seem inevitable. However, if and when the trial starts, Bouterse and his supporters will likely try to disrupt it and generate social unrest as well. END SUMMARY.

More Tiny Steps Forward for Murder Trial

¶2. (SBU) Three Surinamese judges cleared final pre-trial motions on Monday, June 11 and thereby confirmed that former military strongman Desi Bouterse and twenty other suspects must stand trial for the December 1982 murders of fifteen democratic opponents. Bouterse--former military strongman, chairman of the National Democratic Party (NDP), and Member of Parliament--has denied any direct involvement in this case, although he has repeatedly admitted "political responsibility." Observers guess the trial will start in October, after judicial summer vacations. (NOTE: The trial is already years behind schedule, and more delays would be routine.) In Washington on June 18, OAS Deputy Secretary General Albert Ramdin confirmed that the OAS will send observers to the trial at the request of the GOS, and said the OAS would need dates in order to plan.

BOUTERSE CAN'T BE BOTHERED

¶3. (U) Desi Bouterse, who was Army Commander in 1982 when fifteen prominent opponents of military rule were murdered, is the prime suspect in this case. Bouterse has always said because he was de facto head of state during the military period, he feels responsible for the killings. He also maintains that he was not in any way directly involved. Over recent years he has shown a range of different reactions when asked about the start of the perpetually delayed trial. In 2004, after the preliminary hearings, he stated he was relieved that he would finally be able to prove his innocence. In 2005, he threatened judicial authorities, saying, "they will have to stand for the consequences if I am prosecuted," and he repeated this sort of murky verbiage in late 2006 and early ¶2007. In an interview with a local daily the week of June 11, 2007, a seemingly indifferent Bouterse told the reporter that his lawyer is handling the case and that he, Bouterse, is personally more concerned with "internal party affairs than with the ruling by the Court of Justice." Bouterse reiterated his position that the government of President Venetiaan is using this trial to eliminate him, the GOS's biggest political opponent, and also using it as a

smokescreen to distract Surinamers from the real problems in the country. He said he might show up for the trial, depending on circumstances at the time.

EXTRA SECURITY MEASURES

14. (SBU) While Bouterse claims nonchalance, the government is showing every sign of seriousness. The trial will be held at a marine base in Boxel, located 20 miles south of Paramaribo. In April the Ministry of Justice and Police declared the marine base a safe and secure venue for a trial of this magnitude. The Ministry also assigned seating, as the venue is not large enough to hold all who would want to attend. A source at the Attorney General's office told Post that the surviving relatives will be assigned 30 out of the 70 seats, while the suspects will each be assigned one seat for a family member. Twenty seats are reserved for the media. Cameras, laptops and mobile phones will not be allowed in the court room, and during court sessions all traffic will be diverted from nearby roads.

Comment

15. (SBU) It is hard to get excited about GOS announcements on supposed trial progress anymore. While the ruling of the judges and Ramdin's comments give the trial increased legitimacy and would seem to create a push to finally determine a real start date, trepidation and bureaucratic inertia will almost certainly win the day and result in further delays. As for Bouterse, despite his current claims to the contrary, it is to be expected that he will do everything in his power to stay out of prison. The most important

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question in Suriname remains how much power he really has. The NDP is the biggest party in Suriname, and Bouterse has supporters in all layers and age groups in society, including the criminal world. Therefore, if the trial goes forward, at the very least protests and threats to officials involved in the judicial process are a certainty--some officials have already confirmed threats. The trial promises to raise the level of tension in Suriname, but it remains to be seen whether Bouterse has the bite to live up to his bark.
END COMMENT

Schreiber Hughes